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ELLERY QUEEN'S *Mystery Magazine* ®

TOP CON	Clark Howard	6
WIN SOME, LOSE SOME	Jack Ritchie	20
A WOMAN WAITS FOR ME	William Bankier	29
WONDER CURE	Reg Bretnor	49
A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE	Gary Alexander	55
A HARMLESS VANITY	Theda O. Henle	69
THE SHANGHAI GOLD BARS	Ta Huang Chi	77
THE AFFAIR OF THE RELUCTANT WITNESS	Erle Stanley Gardner	106
THE HAND OF GOD	Christianna Brand	131
THE SPY AND THE WALRUS CIPHER	Edward D. Hoch	142
MYSTERY NEWSLETTER	R. E. Porter & Chris Steinbrunner	98
THE JURY BOX	Jon L. Breen	103

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a NEW detective story by

JACK RITCHIE

When our friend, Detective Sergeant Henry H. Turnbuckle of the Milwaukee Police Department, investigates a case, especially a murder case, he examines minutely the implications of every iota of evidence, every jot and tittle of non-evidence, and theorizes exhaustively on the circumstances of the crime and the identity of the criminal. But this time has our Henry H. met his match in relentless reasoning? . . .

WIN SOME, LOSE SOME

by JACK RITCHIE

I rubbed my hands. "Ah, what have we here?"

"A body," Ralph said.

We did indeed. It was that of Paula Washburn, age 36, weight possibly a bit over 130.

She lay prone on the carpeted floor of the walk-in vault-safe. Just beyond her right hand lay a pearl necklace and two diamond rings. Her body had been discovered at 4:30 P.M. by her stepdaughter, Marianne, when she had opened the vault to take another admiring look at her law diploma.

The vault was perhaps eight feet deep, seven wide, and seven high. I supposed that, if it became necessary, I could resort to mathematics and determine just how long a person would survive locked in a room of that size; in this case, however, I did not think that would be necessary. There were other things to consider.

On the far wall of the vault ranged a bank of various-sized safety-deposit boxes. To one side stood three four-door filing cabinets.

"Ralph," I said, "we are here faced with three possibilities."

"All I see are two. Either she got accidentally locked inside or

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somebody did the locking on purpose."

I chuckled good-naturedly. "Have you considered suicide?"

"Not lately, Henry. Who's going to commit suicide by locking herself in a vault? It isn't a neat way to go."

"Ralph, you, as others, are guilty of a common misconception on the question of asphyxiation in vaults. You seem to think that the ending would entail a desperate gasping for air. *Au contraire*. As the percentage of oxygen in the air decreased, one would simply become drowsy, lapse into unconsciousness, and then glide into death."

"You think she might have committed suicide?"

"By no means, Ralph. I was merely touching all bases. If she came down here with the intention of committing suicide, would she just stand there clutching her jewelry—possibly for hours—until she keeled over? No, it would be the normal thing to at least put them down somewhere. On the filing cabinets, for example. Or in the pocket of her dressing gown." I shook my head. "No, Ralph, she did not commit suicide."

I went to the bank of safety-deposit boxes and tested them once again. They were all locked. So were the filing cabinets.

Ralph watched me. "All right, Henry, so maybe she came down here to put away her jewels for the night and the door swung shut behind her and trapped her inside?"

"No, Ralph. As we have seen and tested, the vault door is quite heavy and not at all free-swinging. It requires at least some continuous effort either to open or to shut it. In short, it cannot accidentally drift shut."

Ralph agreed. "Which leaves us with murder. Let's talk to the suspects." There were three of those and they waited out of earshot at the farther end of the rather large drawing room.

James Washburn, husband of the deceased, age in the early fifties: tall, distinguished, open-countenanced, and deep in thought. Marianne, his daughter: small, raven-haired, wary eyes behind shell glasses. And Ronald Goodcart, a distant cousin of the deceased and a weekend guest at the house. Ronald was in his early forties, had black hair, a thin black mustache, and the general mien of a cad.

All three were quite solemn, none of them exhibiting undue grief at the death of Paula Washburn. They had, of course, undergone some preliminary questioning by the uniformed officers who arrived first at the scene. Ralph and I now moved in for in-depth interrogation.

I introduced Ralph and then myself. "Detective Sergeant Henry H. Turnbuckle, MPD." I waited for signs of recognition, but they withheld them.

I regarded James Washburn. "How long were you and the deceased married?"

"Three years. About that."

"When and where did you last see your wife alive?"

"In our bedroom last night at about eleven thirty. She suddenly remembered her jewelry and told me she was going back downstairs to put it into the vault for the night."

I nodded judiciously. "It is now five thirty in the afternoon of the following day and the body was discovered less than one hour ago. How can you explain that?"

"Nobody opened the vault until then."

"I mean you hadn't seen your wife for approximately eighteen hours and yet you never thought to sound some kind of an alarm?"

"I didn't know she was locked in the vault."

I smiled thinly. "Your wife leaves your bedroom, telling you that she is going to put her jewelry into the vault, and she doesn't return? Didn't that make you wonder just a smidgen where she might be?"

"Not really. We sleep in twin beds. After she left the room, I closed my eyes and immediately fell asleep. I didn't wake until nine this morning."

"But surely when you glanced at her bed this morning and found it unoccupied, didn't you begin to wonder where she was?"

"No. I thought she'd just gotten up early and gone downstairs. Paula usually has no more than a cup of coffee for breakfast and then is off. She led a rather independent life and usually didn't bother to let people know where she was going or for how long. I've gone entire weekends without ever seeing her."

"Who discovered the body?"

Marianne Washburn now spoke. "I did. At about four thirty this afternoon when I opened the vault to take another look at my sheepskin. Paula lay there on the floor inside, quite dead."

"Your sheepskin?"

"My law degree. *Magna cum laude*, and stuff. I'm going to have it framed when I open my office, but for now I keep it in the vault and peek at it every now and then. The vault is our storage place for valuable things that are smaller than a bread box. Jewelry, cash, papers, records, mementoes, and new diplomas."

"Isn't there any way to open the vault from the inside? Or at least

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an alarm button which a person could press if he were imprisoned inside?"

"I'm afraid not. The vault was built into the house nearly fifty years ago. Today I suppose a vault must incorporate all kinds of safety features, but in those days they weren't so particular."

"The vault is opened by a combination lock?"

"Yes."

"Who has the combination? Besides you?"

"Dad does. Paula did." She looked at Ronald Goodcart.

He shook his head. "No. Why should I?"

I spoke to Marianne. "When you found Mrs. Washburn, did you touch her, move or take anything?"

"No." Marianne sighed. "Poor Paula. It's obvious that when she went downstairs to put away her jewelry the door of the vault accidentally shut behind her, trapping her inside."

I smiled. "My dear young lady, I have inspected and tested the vault door thoroughly. No vagrant breath of air could set it in motion."

She considered that, then sighed again. "I was just trying to protect Paula's memory. She was so depressed lately. Her health, you know. She had this bad heart. Everybody knows it. Morose and downhearted. Brooding all the time. She must have decided to take her own life."

"Nonsense," Ronald Goodcart said. "Paula was quite cheerful. Vibrant. Besides, she would have left a note."

Marianne regarded him with disdain. "Suicides do not necessarily leave notes. Besides, it could have been a sudden impulse and she discovered too late that she didn't have a pencil and paper with her."

"Ah, yes," I said. "Actually the most interesting aspect of this entire case is the fact that the victim did not leave a note or any other communication behind. It is the very crux of this matter."

Ralph was impressed. "You've gotten to the crux already, Henry?"

I nodded. "The body of Paula Washburn was examined by us, was it not, Ralph? And what did we find in the pocket of her dressing gown?"

"Just a small handkerchief."

"Exactly." I turned back to the suspects. "Let us suppose that Paula Washburn came downstairs to put away her jewelry. She opened the vault door by dialing the combination. And then what? Where, inside the vault, did she intend to put this jewelry?"

Washburn volunteered. "She stored her jewelry in one of the safety-deposit boxes."

I nodded encouragement. "And how did she intend to get *into* that safety-deposit box?"

"With her key, of course."

"Ah, but we found *no* key on her person, or on the floor, or anywhere else in the vault. And all the safety-deposit boxes *and* the filing cabinets are locked. So where did she intend to put this jewelry if she had no key with her?"

Marianne was still trying to sell suicide. "It's obvious, isn't it? She simply forgot the key. It was the last straw, so to speak. Everything had been going wrong all day and she had a headache too. So in one mad moment of frustration and despair, she pulled the vault door shut after her and said goodbye to the world."

I did not buy. "No, Paula Washburn did *not* forget her key. Someone *else* did. And that was the person who closed the vault door behind her."

I had been expecting a gasp or two, but they restrained themselves.

"Ralph," I said, "were there any marks of violence on the victim's body? Anything to suggest that she had been shot, stabbed, bludgeoned, strangled? Any discoloration or suspicious odor which might suggest poisoning?"

"Nothing. The coroner won't get around to the autopsy until after he's had supper, but he says that asphyxiation is a good bet."

I agreed. "And now we come to the poser, the conundrum, the puzzle. Why did Paula Washburn leave no note, no message, no communication of any kind?"

I smiled about. "Suppose that you had just been locked in a vault and knew it had been no accident. Wouldn't you at least have tried to tell the world who locked you in there?"

"Maybe she didn't know," Ralph said.

"A possibility, Ralph. However, even if she *didn't* know who had locked her in, wouldn't she at least have left some kind of information behind indicating that she *had* been locked in and that it hadn't been accidental?"

"She lost her head and panicked," Ralph said. "And it just didn't come to her mind."

"No, Ralph. While panic might be the first and natural reaction, I find it impossible to believe that she could have sustained that panic for three, four, five, or whatever hours it would have taken

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her to collapse. At some point during that time she would surely have recovered enough aplomb to at least leave a message about her suspicions or certainties. And yet she left none. Why not?"

Ralph speculated. "Maybe she *did* leave a message, Henry. A note. But the murderer waited a few hours until he was certain she was dead. And then he opened the vault, pocketed the note, and closed the vault again."

"Possible, Ralph. However, that flimsy theory depends on the victim just happening to have a writing implement and paper in her pocket. Hardly likely, I should think."

I allowed a pause. "However, in such an emergency couldn't she have found some other instrument to write with or a surface to put it on?"

I smiled. "The *diamond* rings. Surely it would have occurred to her to use her diamond rings as writing implements and she could have used any plain surface—the sides or the tops of the filing cabinets, for instance—as her slate? She could very easily have scratched the name of her murderer, or simply indicated that someone unknown had locked her in there. And yet she didn't do this. Why not?"

There was silence.

Ralph frowned. "She was unconscious? The murderer knocked her out before he put her in there?"

"But we found no cranial bruises or injury sufficient to produce such unconsciousness. Besides, even if she were unconscious before being put in there, what guarantee did the murderer have that she would *remain* unconscious until she died by asphyxiation."

Ralph tried again. "She was drugged. That would have held her until she suffocated."

"But surely the murderer must have known that, under the mysterious circumstances of her death, an autopsy would be performed and the presence of drugs discovered in her body." I shook my head. "No, Ralph, the murderer was not the least bit worried about her leaving a message or drugs being found in her system because Paula Washburn was *already dead* when she was locked in the vault."

There were moments of awed silence at my relentless reasoning and then Ralph said, "She didn't die of asphyxiation?"

"Ah, Ralph, but she *did* die of asphyxiation. That was the whole point in putting her body into the vault."

I assumed a grim expression. "She was asphyxiated, but *not* in the vault. And she was put into the vault to cover up the fact that

she was asphyxiated, but somewhere else. And considering what she was wearing at the time of her death—that is, pajamas and a dressing gown—would not that lead us back to one particular room in the house?"

I turned to stare at James Washburn. "Perhaps a plastic bag slipped over her head? But more likely the old-fashioned pillow?"

James Washburn sighed heavily, looked utterly resigned, and opened his mouth to speak.

Marianne spoke first. "I see it all so clearly now. At eleven thirty last night Paula left father's bedroom, telling him she was going downstairs to put away her jewelry. But instead she slipped down the hall to Ronald's bedroom for a tryst, an assignation, a rendezvous."

Goodcart blinked. "She did *not*."

Marianne ignored him. "The two of them had a lover's quarrel. Harsh, bitter words were exchanged. She told him their affair was finished."

Ronald protested. "It never began."

Marianne swept on. "In his moment of rage he seized a pillow and smothered Paula. Then, realizing he had to cover up the crime, he carried her body down to the vault, hoping to make it appear that she had died there accidentally."

Ronald had begun to perspire. "But I don't even know the combination of the vault."

She smiled insincerely in his direction. "We have only your untrustworthy word for that. *Everybody* knows that Paula was a complete witch—if I pronounced that word correctly. She continually flittered from hither to yon and last night you were the nearest hither."

I shook my head. "A noble effort, Miss Washburn, but sheer logic indicates that a woman would not blatantly tell her husband she was going to put her jewelry into the vault and then instead sashay down the hall to an assignation. Her husband might not innocently fall asleep at her departure. After a time he might even come looking for her. No, it is much more logical to assume that if she intended any such action, she would *first* wait until she was certain her husband had fallen asleep before she ventured out of the bedroom."

I took my celluloid card out of my breast coat pocket.

Ralph stopped me. "What are you doing, Henry?"

"I'm about to read Mr. Washburn his rights."

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"The Supreme Court insists on it."

Ralph took me aside. "Henry, you know and I know that Washburn killed his wife. Everybody in this room does. But what *solid* proof do we have? I'm talking about things that people can see and touch. People like district attorneys who have to get the indictments or the judges who have to issue them."

"Ralph, the man seems almost eager to confess."

"Henry, I doubt that his daughter, the brand-new lawyer, will allow him to confess to anything."

Marianne had edged close enough to hear us. She nodded and smiled sweetly.

I experienced moral indignation. "Ralph, we have here a cold-blooded murder. This man held a pillow over the face of his wife until she was asphyxiated. Seven or eight minutes, assuming that there was no leakage of air. But probably longer."

James Washburn had joined us. "Seven or eight minutes? But it wasn't anywhere near—"

Marianne quickly put her hand over his mouth. "Suppose," she said, "suppose this somebody who wielded the pillow merely wanted to stop the victim's vituperation and hysteria. He had no intention at all of murdering her. He just wanted to shut her up for a while. He held the pillow over her head for perhaps one minute."

Washburn freed his mouth. "Maybe not even that long."

"Maybe less," Marianne said swiftly. "And when Paula ceased to struggle, he removed the pillow from her face and was utterly astounded to discover she was dead."

Washburn nodded eagerly.

Marianne glared at him for a moment, then continued, "And suppose that since he had no conception at all as to the amount of time it takes to asphyxiate anyone with a pillow, he merely *assumed* he had killed her? Actually she had died of a heart attack, not of asphyxiation. And so, succumbing to perfectly understandable panic, he carried her body down to the vault and tried to make it appear as though she had accidentally locked herself inside."

I folded my arms. "Even assuming that is what occurred, in this state if a person dies as the result of stress during a hostile act, it would be considered at least manslaughter."

Marianne smiled. "But can you *prove* even manslaughter? And there will be *no* confession. And if this person were somehow convicted—which is highly unlikely since thirty-seven character witnesses will testify in his behalf—he will probably—considering his

unblemished past and his standing in the community—be put on probation for six months. Would you cause all that trouble just to stick some poor unfortunate soul with a six-months' probation?"

There was respectful silence while I stared out of a window.

Finally I put my celluloid card back into my pocket. "Ralph, my mother cried for three days when she discovered that I had joined the Milwaukee Police Department. She was right."

"Now, now, Henry," Ralph said. "We win some and we lose some." He turned to the others. "Does anyone have a glass of sherry?"

"Not here, Ralph," I said firmly.

Ralph embarrassed me further by explaining. "Whenever one of Henry's cases doesn't go just right, he finds that a glass or two of sherry helps to buck him up."

Ronald Goodcart folded his arms. "I'll bet he drinks a lot."

That remark was entirely uncalled for. I consume perhaps one bottle of sherry a year. Well, maybe two.

I declined their sherry and we left.

At eight that evening the coroner phoned me at my apartment to let me know that the autopsy had shown that Paula Washburn had died of a heart attack, not of asphyxiation.

At nine my door buzzer sounded.

It was Marianne. "Do you realize that you are the only Turnbuckle in the telephone directory?"

I sighed. "I am the only Turnbuckle who ever left Sheboygan for more than a weekend."

She held up what looked like a bottle in a paper bag. "I thought I'd drop in and see if it's possible to cheer you up."

It was.

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